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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 001423

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL AM

SUBJECT: BOMB ROCKS OUTSPOKEN OPPOSITION PAPER IN YEREVAN

REF: YEREVAN 1279

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) An outspoken opposition newspaper was bombed in the early hours on December 13. Nobody was in the offices of the stridently pro-Ter-Petrossian &Chorrorid Ishkhanutyun8 (Fourth Estate) newspaper when the bomb went off, and no injuries were reported. The editor-in-chief suggested the authorities masterminded the bombing, claiming the paper had received two recent threats about its portrayals of Prime Minister Sargsian. The police launched an investigation into the bombing, but have yet to release a statement. Armenia's government Ombudsman condemned the incident, saying it threatens freedom of expression and pluralism. End summary.

BLAST AT OPPOSITION PAPER AS POLITICAL TEMPERATURE RISES

¶2. (U) At 4:40 in the morning on December 13, a bomb rocked the entrance of the offices of the radical, opposition &Chorrorid Ishkhanutyun8 (Fourth Estate) newspaper. Planted outside the office, the bomb severely damaged the front doors and resulted in minor damage to furniture inside the office. Nobody was inside the building when the bomb went off, and police confirmed that there were no injuries. The police have launched an investigation.

¶3. (U) Shogher Matevosyan, the editor-in-chief of the &Fourth Estate8, suggested the authorities had a hand in the bombing, claiming her staff had received two recent threats to tone down its aggressive caricatures of Prime Minister Sargsian. She said the Prime Minister's well-known bodyguard/driver/aide "Vatcho" had delivered one of these, and another came from a controversial district mayor of Yerevan's Erebuni district.

¶4. (SBU) The &Fourth Estate,8 which is published twice a week, has a lowly circulation of 4,000, and is generally untrustworthy in its reporting. It is a radical opposition paper that has fervently backed the campaign of ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian. Matevosyan is one of the five Ter-Petrossian activists who were detained by Yerevan police -- and subsequently charged with resisting police orders -- in late October (reftel). In that case, police forcibly intervened to break up a pro-Ter-Petrossian demonstration the activists were holding to promote the ex-President's first public rally held October 26.

¶5. (U) Police have yet to issue a formal statement on the

bombing. Aram Harutyunyan, the Armenian government's Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman), issued one the day of the bombing, however. He told Armenian wire services that the bombing threatened the establishment of freedom of expression and pluralism in Armenia. &Democracy is based on tolerance,⁸ he said, &and in this respect such (an) intolerant attitude to media carries an extremely dangerous tendency, which is indecent for the (sic) society striving for democracy and legal state (sic).⁸

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The bombing of the &Fourth Estate⁸ office is potentially an ominous harbinger of things to come as the presidential election approaches and the political stakes rise. Unfortunately, Armenia has a track record of election-related violence, and bombings of opposition media and political opponents have occurred before during close races. Usually, these bombings go unsolved. While it seems more likely than not that the bombing was what it first seems -- intimidation from pro-regime forces -- we also do not rule out the possibility that the Ter-Petrossian camp may itself be responsible. Ter-Petrossian's team understands that the government's relatively heavy-handed tactics against Ter-Petrossian supporters have played right into opposition hands. Such incidents reinforce the ex-president's chief contention that the current authorities are a bunch of criminal hooligans, while also subtly underlining that the authorities fear Ter-Petrossian as an opponent. Whether this bombing was actually a ham-handed move by thuggish pro-governmental partisans, or an opposition gambit to look like one, the likely outcome is the same: more credibility and sympathy for Ter-Petrossian.

PENNINGTON